

Conservation District Powers & Responsibilities

What Are a Conservation District's Legal Powers?

These powers, fully detailed in Section 8 of Part 93, Public Act 451 of 1994 are outlined as follows:

- A. Conduct surveys, investigations and research relating to the conservation of farmland and natural resources, and to publish results;
- B. Conduct demonstration projects on conservation methods and measures;
- C. Carry out preventive and control measures on lands owned or controlled by the state or on private lands upon obtaining consent of owner;
- D. Cooperate or enter into agreements with agencies, governmental or otherwise, or any land owner in carrying out erosion control or prevention measures;
- E. Own or lease property, earn income from that property, sell or lease that property and use funds obtained to support District activities as provided by law;
- F. Make available services, machinery, and materials that will assist land users to establish conservation measures on their lands, according to terms prescribed by the District;
- G. Engage in plant rescue operations; plant, harvest, and sell only conservation species indicated on the list as established in Section 4a.
- H. Provide technical assistance to other Conservation Districts.
- I. Construct, improve and maintain structures and measures necessary to carry out operations authorized in the Act;
- J. Develop comprehensive plans for conservation of farmland and natural resources and for control and prevention of soil erosion.
- K. Take over by purchase, lease or otherwise, to administer any farmland and natural conservation project located in the District which has been established by any agency of state or federal government; or to manage as agent of any agency of state or federal government any farmland and natural resource conservation project with in the District including acquisition, construction, operation and administration. Accept donations, gifts, monetary contributions, services, materials or otherwise from any state, federal or other source to use or expend in carrying on District operations.
- L. Sue and be sued in the name of the District; have perpetual succession; have a seal that is judicially noticed; make and execute contracts and other instruments to exercise powers; and make, amend and repeal rules and regulations to carry into effect its purposes and powers.
- M. Borrow money for facilities or equipment for conservation purposes and pledge the assets of the District as collateral against loans. Money borrowed is the sole obligation of the District.

- N. May require contributions in money, services, materials or otherwise for extending benefits provided under the Act to private land owners, and may require landowners to enter into and perform agreements or covenants as to the permanent use of the lands that will tend to prevent or control erosion.
- O. Act as compliance assistance agent for other federal, state and county laws.
- P. Act as the enforcing agency for a county if designated under Section 5, Part 91 of Act 451, the Soil Erosion and Sedimentation Control Act

What Are Conservation District's Responsibilities to Maintain its Legal Status as an Entity of Government?

Section 7, Part 93 of Act 451 fully details the responsibilities which are outlined as follows:

- A. Establish a fiscal year. This is done by board action and can be any twelvemonth period. The fiscal year can be changed at any time by subsequent board action.
- B. Hold an annual meeting of land occupiers of the District within 30 days of the end of the District's fiscal year; notice of annual meeting must be published in the official paper of record for the District at least 45 days prior to the date of the event.
- C. Hold an election of directors at the annual meeting; term of office shall be 4 years. Absentee ballots shall be provided to residents unable to attend the annual meeting at any time after publication of, and prior to, the meeting date.
- D. Fill board of director vacancies by appointment until next annual meeting.
- E. Execute surety bonds for officers and employees entrusted with funds and equipment.
- F. Keep full and accurate records of all proceedings.
- G. Provide an annual audit of the accounts of receipts and disbursements.
- H. Provide copies of all proceedings, contracts, copies of ordinances, rules, regulations, orders, etc. to the Michigan Department of Agriculture, upon request.

Note: As a unit of government, Conservation Districts must comply with all federal and state laws and rules governing the operation of a governmental entity, such as the Open Meetings Act (Public Act 267 of 1976, as amended), Freedom of Information Act (Public Act 442 of 1976, as amended), Civil Rights Acts (Public Act 220 and 453, as amended), for a more complete review of these acts see **Appendix C** of this handbook.

When is a Person Duly Authorized to Assume His/Her Position as a Conservation District Director?

A Director officially takes office when the election results have been certified and a notarized oath of office is on file at the Michigan Department of Agriculture. This applies to an incumbent as well as an appointee and a director elected for the first term.

To What Rights and Privileges is a Conservation District Director Entitled?

As an elected official of a unit of government, a director:

- ◆ Is covered by worker's compensation while performing District director duties;
- ◆ May receive a per diem of up to the amount that the Commission of Agriculture receives.
- ◆ Is not personally liable for actions of the Board while performing duties of director.

What Types of Activities Are Required of a Conservation District Director?

The Michigan legislature has given Conservation District directors broad powers to develop and carry out soil and water conservation programs. To carry out these powers, directors have the responsibility to take the leadership role in the following:

- ◆ Participate in development of long term, strategic plans of action and in developing and carrying out the annual plan of action.
- ◆ Prepare for, conduct and participate in Conservation District board meetings and attend Michigan Association of Conservation District (MACD) state and area meetings and state and regional training sessions conducted by MDA and partners. To be fully effective you should miss no more than 3 District board meetings per year.
- ◆ Provide for the keeping of a full and accurate record (minutes) of all proceedings and all resolutions, regulations, and orders issued or adopted.
- ◆ Provide for the preparation, publishing , and distribution of an annual report.
- ◆ Secure needed funds for adequate district operations and oversee proper dispersal of funds according to state and federal law. **It is important to note here, it is the director's responsibility to secure funding by setting priorities, identifying sources, meeting with other public officials, and keeping open channels of communication with conservation organizations.** Staff will complete the necessary applications, but should not be expected to make all contacts necessary.
- ◆ Prepare an annual budget and maintain an approved bookkeeping system that reflects all income and expenditures. Prepare an annual financial statement and provide for an annual audit.
- ◆ Employ personnel and determine their qualifications, duties, and compensation. Keep abreast of performance and provide administrative supervision. Understand working agreements established with personnel and comply with all conditions.
- ◆ Serve as the "up-front" person for the District by representing the District at public functions sponsored by the District and at functions related to soil and water conservation activities.
- ◆ Establish, review, and understand Conservation District policies.
- ◆ Annually designate your chairperson and other officers.
- ◆ Establish the priority of work.

- ◆ Establish and maintain communications with public and private leaders within the Conservation District who can support the District program.
- ◆ Make decisions in response to all proposals presented to the board.
- ◆ Sponsor and actively participate in educational activities to inform people about the soil and water conservation program and to enlist their support.

Other Legal Responsibilities of a Conservation District

Because Conservation Districts are recognized for their expertise in areas dealing with soil, water and related resources they have been written into various state laws and given a role to play in the operation of those laws. Your District office should have a copy of the full text of these laws on hand for reference. Below is a brief description of Conservation District responsibilities concerning each of these laws.

Soil Erosion and Sedimentation Control Act, Part 91 of Public Act 451 of 1994 - the Michigan Compiled Environmental Code (formerly 1972 PA 347).

An Act to provide for the control of soil erosion and to protect the waters of the state from sedimentation. This act pertains to earth changes within 500 feet of a lake or stream or which disturbs one or more acres of land. The practices of forestry, mining, or tilling and harvesting of crops are exempt from this law.

Part 91 provides various means for Conservation District involvement. (Note: “the department” in Part 91 refers to the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality):

1. The Department of Agriculture, with the assistance of the Conservation Districts and in consultation with appropriate state and local agencies, shall prepare and submit to the department for the department’s approval a unified statewide soil erosion and sedimentation control program.
2. The county board of commissioners, by resolution, shall designate a county agency, or a Conservation District upon the concurrence of the Conservation District, as the county enforcing agency responsible for administration and enforcement in the name of the county. The resolution may set forth fees for inspections, plan reviews, and permits and may set forth other matters relating to the administration and enforcement of this part and the rules.
3. A city, village, or charter township by ordinance may provide for soil erosion and sedimentation control on public and private land uses within its boundaries except that a charter township ordinance shall not be applicable within a village that has in effect an ordinance providing soil erosion and sedimentation control. The city, village, or charter township may consult with a Conservation District for assistance or advice in the preparation of the ordinance.
4. A city, village, or charter township ordinance for soil and sedimentation control proposed to be adopted shall be submitted to the department for approval before adoption. The department shall forward a copy to the appropriate Conservation District for review and comment.
5. An authorized public agency or a county or local enforcing agency may enter into an agreement with a Conservation District for assistance and advice in overseeing and

reviewing compliance with adequate soil erosion and sedimentation control procedures and in reviewing existing or proposed land uses, land use plans, or site plans with regard to technical matters pertaining to soil erosion and sedimentation control.

In addition to or in absence of such agreements, Conservation Districts may perform periodic reviews and evaluations of the agency's operation procedures pursuant to standards and specifications developed in cooperation with the respective Districts and as approved by the department. Such reviews and evaluations shall be submitted to the administering agency of the department for the appropriate action.

6. A state, local, or county agency may apply to the department for designation as an authorized public agency by submitting to the department the soil erosion and sedimentation control procedures governing all land uses normally under taken by the agency. If the applicant is a local or county agency, the department shall submit the procedures to the appropriate Conservation District for review, and the Conservation District shall submit its comments on the procedures to the department within 60 days.

It is a good practice to review Soil Erosion and Sedimentation Control permits, however, many Conservation Districts do not. Where reviews are currently completed, the procedures for review vary widely. When in doubt, the local or county enforcing agent should be consulted for review procedures.

Inland Lakes and Stream Act, Part 301 of Public Act 451 of 1994 (formerly 1972 PA 346).

This act is to regulate inland lakes and streams and to protect Riparian Rights and public interest in inland lakes and streams.

Generally Part 301 permits are required for dredge or fill operations or changes that interfere with the natural flow of an inland lake or stream. Numerous exceptions exist under the law. Questions regarding the necessity of a 301 permit should be directed to the Department of Natural Resources, Land Resource Programs Division.

Under Part 301, Conservation Districts:

1. Are allowed 20 days from submission of the application to review permit.
2. Can submit changes in conservation practices or inclusion of them if omitted in application.
3. May submit a written request to Department of Environmental Quality, Land and Management Division for a public meeting to review the application. The purpose of the meeting would be to recommend changes in the application to the land owner and the Department of Natural Resources.

The Conservation District role is to comment on the permit application, but no action need be taken. Districts should record for the minutes that the notice has been reviewed and filed or action taken. Six months is long enough to keep this on file.

Sand Dune Protection and Management Act, Part 353 of Public Act 451 of 1994 (formerly 1976 PA 222).

This act provides for study, protection, management and reclamation of Great Lakes sand dunes. This Act affects Conservation Districts such that:

1. Local Conservation Districts shall receive a notice of an application for permits for uses in critical dune areas. The notice shall state that unless a written request is filed with the local unit of government within 20 days after notice is mailed, the local unit of government may grant the application without public hearing.
2. After consulting with the local Conservation District, a local unit of government that has 1 or more critical dune areas within its jurisdiction may formulate a zoning ordinance pursuant to the zoning acts noted in Sec. 35312(1)(a-c) of Part 353.
3. A zoning ordinance shall require that all applications for permits for the use of a critical dune area include in writing, among other things, assurances that the cutting and removing of trees and other vegetation will be performed according to the instructions or plans of the local Conservation District.
4. Unless a variance is granted, a zoning ordinance shall not permit the following use, among others, in a critical dune area: A structure and access to the Michigan Conservation Districts Director's Handbook structure on a slope within a critical dune area that has a slope that measures from 1-foot vertical rise in a 4-foot horizontal plane to less than a 1-foot vertical rise in a 3-foot horizontal plane, unless the structure and access to the structure are in accordance with plans prepared for the site by a registered professional architect or a licensed professional engineer and the plans provide for the disposal of storm waters without serious soil erosion and without sedimentation of any stream or other body of water. Prior to approval of the plan, the planning commission shall consult with the local Conservation District.
5. Appropriations to the Department of Agriculture shall be sufficient to assure adequate funding for the Conservation Districts to fulfill their responsibilities under this part.

The Conservation District's primary role is to comment on the permit application, although no action need be taken. Districts should record for the minutes that the notice has been reviewed and filed or action taken. Six months is long enough to keep on file.

The Great Lakes Submerged Lands Act and the Ordinary High-Water Mark, Part 325 of Public Act 451 of 1994 (formerly 1955 PA 247, as amended).

This act authorizes the Department of Environmental Quality to grant, convey or leave unconveyed lake bottom lands and unconveyed lands in the Great Lakes belonging to the State of Michigan. The act also provides rules for the use of public and private submerged lands and establishes an ordinary high-water mark for the Great Lakes.

Under this act a permit and/or lease, deed or agreement is required from the Department of Environmental Quality for:

1. Dredging and/or filling bottom land below the ordinary high-water mark.
2. Placement or alteration of a structure on bottom land below the ordinary highwater mark (this includes permanent docks and boathouse).
3. Development, construction, and operation of a marina.
4. Interference with the natural flow of great lakes coastal waters.

5. Construction, alteration or connection of any artificial waterway (i.e., upland channel, lagoon, artificial harbor, etc.) extending landward off the ordinary highwater mark.
6. Any artificially-made lands below the ordinary high-water mark fill.

Not all Conservation Districts review Act 325 applications. For those that do a review, the District has 20 days from date of mailing to respond with their concerns about the application.

The Conservation District's role is to comment on the permit application, but no action need be taken. Districts should record for the minutes that the notice has been reviewed and filed or action take. Six months is long enough to keep on file.

Farmland and Open Space Preservation Act, Part 361 of Public Act 451 of 1994 as amended (formerly 1974 PA 116 - **still commonly referred to as PA 116**).

This act provides for farmland development rights agreements and open space development rights agreements.

Under this law, Conservation Districts are asked to review Part 361 applications. The District has 30 days to review, comment, and make recommendations to the local governing body with which the application is filed. While the District does not have approval or rejection power, the District's review is very instrumental in an application approval or denial, as Districts are often the only review body which has local knowledge and experience in agriculture.

In addition, part of the application for Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) requires that the applicant submit to the state pertinent information obtained from the local Conservation District. This portion of the application asks the Conservation District to verify the number and percentage of acres nominated to PDR that are devoted to agriculture; the number and percentage of acres considered prime and/or unique farmland; and whether the nominated land has any other unique characteristics (i.e. Centennial Farm, stream or lake frontage, cultural historic site, significant wetlands, etc.). See the Appendix for a copy of this application.

Some suggestions for handling Part 361 applications:

1. All actions of the District on applications should be recorded in the minutes in form of motions (a motion may cover individual applications or one motion can apply to the whole group presented).

Applications should be listed in the minutes by (1) owner, (2) location (township and section number), (3) number of acres. This will be helpful when questions arise as to what action was taken on a particular parcel of land. Note: Some Districts are numbering each application consecutively by year (e.g. 86-217).

2. A listing of applications by owner and location on the agenda is helpful to directors who may want to look at or ask questions about a parcel prior to the board meeting.
3. Verification forms should be sent to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Real Estate Division.

Dear Richard and Sally Cisco:

The Wolverine Conservation District has reviewed the Farmland and Open Space Preservation Act (Part 361 of Act 451 of 1994, as amended) application #86-216 of Richard and Sally Cisco, Section 25, Golden Township, 157 acres for 30 years.

We recommend the application be approved.

Sincerely,

4. A letter of approval or denial for Part 361 applications should be sent to the county or township clerk and a copy to the landowner. *(See sample letter on the right)*

Conservation District Liability

The Conservation District Law under powers of Districts and Directors, Section 9308, paragraph (l) states: "To sue and be sued in the name of the District." This statement in the District's enabling legislation protects District directors from legal claims arising from their activities as District directors. The Conservation District is the liable party.

Conservation Districts are afforded protection under Act 170, P.A. 1964, which provides immunity in all cases where a government agent is engaged in the exercise and discharge of its governmental function. Exceptions to the law where Conservation Districts are liable in cases involving:

1. Breach of contract.
2. Liability for bodily injury and property damage resulting from negligent operation of a government owned vehicle by any director, agent, or employee of a governmental agency.
3. Liability for bodily injury or property damage resulting from a dangerous or defective condition of a public building.
4. Liability from which the District has charged for its services.

As units of state government, Conservation Districts may be entitled to the services of the Attorney General's office. All requests to the Attorney General must be channeled first to the Director of the Environmental Stewardship Division of the Michigan Department of Agriculture.